

Time on the Cross

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980).

On September 30, 1981, the Guatemalan government of General Romeo Lucas summoned all local journalists and the entire diplomatic corps, including U.S. Ambassador Frederic Chapin, to the National Palace for a press conference with an undisclosed agenda. As the Guatemalan journalists filed in, they received envelopes from Lucas's press secretary, which turned out to contain the only questions the reporters would be allowed to ask following the presentation. The press secretary then introduced a priest, a Guatemalan Jesuit of whom nothing had been known since the previous June 9th when, according to eyewitness accounts gathered by the Jesuit Mission, he had been knocked unconscious and abducted from his car by three armed men in broad daylight in the streets of Guatemala City.

At the conference the priest, Father Luis Pellecer, wearing the collar which friends said he shunned before his disappearance, showed no outward signs of physical abuse. His tone, however, was leaden, and he used none of the Chaplinesque mannerisms and stinging wit for which he had been known among the religious in Guatemala. He stepped up to the microphone and said, "I am a priest, 35 years of age, and a member until June 8th of this year of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [or EGP, the largest armed leftist organization in Guatemala]. At that time I decided of my own free will to seek out the country's security forces and terminate my subversive, militant existence."

Thus began what was literally a tour de force staged by the Lucas government: as tapes of the Pellecer press conference played night after night on Guatemalan television, the military shipped the priest to El Salvador and Honduras for similar performances. Throughout, he remained in the custody of the security forces, who said he had not requested to be released from their protection. He could not be visited or examined alone.

The priest said he had been an unarmed member of a propaganda commission for the guerrilla group, an assertion which the EGP later confirmed. "How could I have been so blind? A religious man like myself, bewitched into choosing

a life of violence?" Pellecer asked before an audience which sat in sepulchral stillness.

I learned to manipulate the intellectual machinery of the Theology of Liberation. This theology introduces the poor to a new Jesus Christ, rebellious . . . revolutionary . . . a partial Jesus solely devoted to the salvation of the poor and banishing the rich, the powerful, those at the head of government. This Jesus was totally detached from the Church as an institution. . . . Supposedly our Father sent him to earth to build a new kingdom, which we define as a socialist kingdom . . . for which we obviously need power Almost all the Jesuits of my own generation have been indoctrinated . . . with the science of Marxism. . . . How could I have possibly believed it would remain a mere theory?

After naming numerous clergy and programs disseminating "a whole new set of teachings for the oppressed," Pellecer tendered his resignation from the Jesuit Order. He ended by beseeching the Guatemalan people for forgiveness.

If the Pellecer statement, fifty pages in transcript, cannot be dismissed out of hand—though it gives every sign of being wrenched from a terrorized and perhaps completely altered mind—it is because of its unwonted eloquence, and the precision of its argument. De-emphasizing the delusions of ubiquitous Soviet scheming which characterize conventional Guatemalan rightist doctrine, the Pellecer confession sends a spike right at the Catholic Church's bared Achilles' heel: its place in a process of revolutionary change, particularly one born of bloody class warfare. Between 1964 and 1981 about 950 members of the Catholic clergy in Latin America were murdered or disappeared, nearly 100 were tortured but survived, and hundreds more were exiled from their countries. Yet the Pellecer case marks the first incident in which a military government seized the pastoral prerogatives, demanding confession from a priest and then meting out its pardon. As such, it was a particularly conspicuous challenge to Catholics on the continent to confront the agonizing dilemmas that arise for an institution of the masses which attempts to abstain from violence and partisan politics while residing in ferociously polarized societies dominated by official terror.

For American readers the only popular, secular text available to help salvage the Pellecer incident from quick historical obscurity is Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People*. For a decade Lernoux has been the Latin America correspondent for the *Nation* and the *National Catholic Reporter*. Based in Bogotá, Colombia, she has come to exemplify much of what average American correspondents in Latin America are not. She is enough drawn to the continent to settle there permanently. She has turned often and respectfully to local documentation and sources, studiously cultivating those who could speak for the

disenfranchised majority. With a seasoned eye she has consistently looked past the political medicine-show of the moment to follow the evolution of institutions and the movement of money. In her previous articles, pith has been the hallmark of her prose. Now she has written a substantial book which documents the rise since 1960 of military states guided by a doctrine of national security learned from the United States—"creole fascism" is Lernoux's term—and the parallel growth of a radical Christian movement and theology stemming from a renewed commitment of the Catholic clergy to the region's poor.

This reader, for one, was surprised to find that the plain-spoken clairvoyance of Lernoux's *Nation* essays is not among the strengths of her first book. Instead, the virtues of passion have supplanted those of precision. She is writing as a convert; she has become a journalistic apostle for the Theology of Liberation. Her book is in the first place an extraordinary monument to the Christians who died in the Latin American holocaust, engraving names and places for public memory. It is also an exegesis, biblical in its accumulation of evidence, of ecclesiastical documents from the Bishops' conferences at Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979, citing "the presence of many oppressive regimes in our continent . . . subject to more powerful multinational centers which often look to their own interests at the expense of the nations where they are located . . . condemning the continent to permanent underdevelopment." Thus, the centerpiece of this book is an exceptionally complete encyclopedia of two decades of United States intervention in Latin America. Lernoux details the effects of U.S. government support, to the tune of \$2.7 billion between 1959 and 1978, for training and weaponry for the armies and security forces which had seized power in eleven of Latin America's largest countries by 1979. She collects the most egregious examples of American corporate malfeasance and defalcation, such as the United Fruit scandal of 1975 in Honduras that ended when company president Eli Black flung himself to his death from a skyscraper overlooking Park Avenue in New York City. She links these factors to the persecution of Catholics. It may not, for example, be common knowledge that between 1961 and 1970 the CIA used a prominent Catholic research institute in Chile to funnel \$2.5 million to the Christian Democratic Party there, as part of a continuing effort to block socialist Salvador Allende from electoral power that culminated in the coup of 1973. Similarly, in the wake of the rape and murder of four American Church women in El Salvador in December 1980, it bears remembering how Father Jerome Cypher from Medford, Wisconsin, met his death in 1976 in Olancho, Honduras (a country which has sent 367 of its top military officers for U.S. training in Panama since that year). "Cypher was whipped and beaten . . . then castrated

and shot," by Lieutenant Benjamin Plata of the Honduran army, who later, anomalously, faced trial for the crime. Cypher's body was thrown into a well along with two peasant women who were still alive, and "Lt. Plata tossed two sticks of dynamite on top of them to seal the hole..." At a February 1982 demonstration by Catholics in Washington to protest the renewal of United States aid to the junta of El Salvador, one religious woman was toting a placard that read, "U.S. Guns Kill U.S. Nuns." That succinctly summarizes one argument which *Cry of the People* definitively documents.

But an equally central value of this book for Americans is as a lay history and explication of the liberationist philosophy. To synthesize, following the dictums of the Vatican II Councils of 1964-66 the Catholic clergy moved to renounce its seat in a governing troika which had persisted in provincial Latin America through four and a half centuries, consisting of the landowner, the general, and the bishop. The clergy, sometimes with the support of local hierarchies, took a leap from its nineteenth-century post as keeper of the celestial gates and landed on the brown earth of post-war Latin America. Adopting a literal interpretation of the notion of "witness," nuns, priests, and even prelates moved in with the poor, a cohabitation which quickly drew suspicion from ascendant armies tutored by American advisers to identify their enemy as a faceless "subversion" likely to take highly disarming guises. Out of propinquity, persecution, and an unprecedented concern to educate the oppressed for civic participation came a burgeoning of grass-roots Catholic organizations. These included cooperatives, trade unions, peasant federations, radio school networks, and Basic Christian Communities (now numbering over 100,000 in Latin America), egalitarian local alliances for civic improvement bound together by common scripture study and basic education. At the same time, surprisingly broad sectors of the Church hierarchy (including radicals and many centrists and excluding only old-line conservatives) began to enunciate a new critique of Latin American society, which was reaffirmed and codified in the documents of the 1979 Puebla conference. While warning against atheistic or dictatorial communism, this view places the blame for the deepening impoverishment of the poor on the continent squarely on United States corporate capitalism. "No one can deny the concentration of corporate, rural and urban property in the hands of the few" reads the final Puebla document. "There is also a concentration of power in civil or military technocracies. ... The fear of Marxism impedes many from facing the oppressive reality of capitalism."

Among its more convinced exponents, this critique was accompanied by a revolutionary, utopian, "prophetic" vision, "to make society over from the bottom up," as Lernoux says. Replacing the "institutionalized violence" and "situation of social sin" of the national security states would be a remoralized, nonviolent society built on decentralized, activist, collective communities of the

poor. Private property would exist, under the lien of a "social mortgage" (a term coined by Pope John Paul II), which would ensure a dignified subsistence to all. Dom Helder Camara, the radical Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, is as concise as most of the liberationists ever get when he says, "The world trend is toward socialism. At this time Christians offer to it the mystique of universal brotherhood and hope."

This undaunted optimistic humanism flourishing like greenery on a solid wall of military dictatorships is wonderfully appealing, even to non-Catholics. Moreover, Lernoux spent four years interviewing besieged priests and nuns, living with no protection but their faith awaiting the next grenade attack or visit from a para-police kidnap squad, in utterly austere slums and hamlets all over the continent. They present an example of service that is completely compelling to see up close. But in writing as an advocate, Lernoux has incorporated into her work many of the analytical shortfalls of the liberationist worldview as well as its message of loving change.

She likes to identify the malfunctions of Latin American societies in moral rather than structural terms. For instance, her account of Peru's 1976 battle with the International Monetary Fund goes thus: "So while the [foreign commercial] banks could be said to have grown fat on the government's spendthrift ways, the Peruvians themselves were responsible for the economic mess. The same could be said of the sins of the foreign investors. Were it not for the venality, selfishness and short-sightedness of the Latin Americans who rule these countries, it would be more difficult, if not impossible, for foreign firms to get away with so much chicanery." As a corollary, she also emphasizes ideas and belief over socio-economic factors as the moving forces behind the upheavals of the continent the past two decades. She identifies the clergy itself as the chief instigator of the telluric Catholic movement, bringing the enlightenment of rejuvenated mission to benighted and stagnant Latin backwaters.

However, it bears noting that far from static, the lot of the poor in the last two decades of capitalist growth in Latin America was one of protracted, unpredictable change. The period has brought continued massive alienation of the peasantry from the land, through population growth, direct expropriation by large landholders, and simple deterioration of the terms of commerce from small agriculturalists. (Speaking of his diocese in Brazil's Amazon, Dom Pedro Casaldáliga remarks, "I may end up as the bishop of cows, because there won't be any people left.") The Latin American landscape became hectic with the migrations of the displaced. There were internal movements of the poor from country to town and town to metropolis, cyclical migrations of seasonal workers, and long-term leaps between countries and to the United States, all too

continuous and too invisible to be adequately quantified. During these two decades, industrial production became more technical, and marketplace trade relations in many areas became more rationalized. One large effect was to de-personalize, secularize, and completely dissolve many of the family- and community-oriented traditional forms of organization for the poor. Lernoux quotes a Dominican priest describing the advent of absentee ownership in the sugar region of his parish: "Before, social relations were vertical, from superior to inferior, and that was perhaps not ideal. But now there are no interpersonal relations at all."

It was also a time of intense organized activism of the lower middle class, urban workers, and the rural poor, outside the scope of the Church. Chile, for example, from the mid-sixties until the 1973 coup, saw a rising of land-invasions by rural agricultural workers (over 1,000 in 1971 alone) and squatters' movements. In Brazil, the Peasant Leagues of the northeast in the populist interlude before 1964 gave the peasants virtually the only autonomous political organizations they have had in that country in the twentieth century. Coalitions of peasants, labor unions, and students brought a radical military government to power in Bolivia briefly in the early seventies. In large part the anticommunist military regimes in these and other countries intervened to suppress labor and community organizations of the poor whose demands could no longer be met without threatening the balance of class power. In addition, beginning with the earthquake of 1972, in Nicaragua "seismic" revolutions began one by one to undermine the foundations of the ancient military regimes there, in El Salvador, and Guatemala, drawing new rounds of repression.

Thus, by the seventies, contrary to the presumption of inert backwardness which Lernoux reiterates, the poor in the countries where the church grew strongest were often mobilized, but facing a two-fold attack on their forms of political and social organization, through economic displacement and political terror. The Catholic Church, rather than an instigator, was often the institutional mantle for popular groundswells. The hierarchy found itself sheltering and sustaining the only visible, broad-based opposition to the "creole fascist" military machines. Meanwhile, it fell to nuns and priests to provide vocabulary, resources, and organizational know-how to rebuild community institutions. In the Central American revolutionary isthmus, in Brazil, the grass roots of the Church were so active that, the hierarchies felt directly threatened and maneuvered to reconsolidate their sway. In many localities the poor have simply run off with the church. In a clandestine interview in the summer of 1981 a Quiche Indian leader of the largest peasant confederation in Guatemala, now completely underground, was succinct when asked why he had joined the revolutionary opposition: "I'm a Catholic," he said. "When I was a boy the priest told me the poor were the chosen people of God."

The popular pressure on the Catholic institutions in Latin America is germane here because, having disassociated itself from the powers-that-be over the last two decades, the Church now urgently confronts the questions of power again, this time from the vantage point of those who have little of it and who also face exterminating repression. Should the Church seek power on behalf of the poor, or help the poor to seek it themselves? Can the Church under some circumstances support revolution as a legitimate response to tyranny? Who shall decide what those circumstances might be? Can Christians be encouraged to bear arms against official repression? to revolt? Can the clergy do so? The matter of means is what is posed by the haunted *mea culpa* of the Guatemalan Jesuit, Father Pellecer. His fate illustrates the intensity of the debate within the hierarchy. Just before his press conference on September 30, Pellecer was allowed a meeting with the Guatemalan bishops. Cardinal Mario Casariego (perhaps the most conservative man in the Latin American Church) ignored the laborious confession and left the priest in stunned speechlessness by pointing at him and denouncing him as a subversive "Judas."

In *Cry of the People*, Lernoux cannot be expected to adjudicate such moral matters, which have troubled Catholic doctrine for centuries. But in practice she deals with them at best with confession, and more often avoids them altogether. She does name the forms of political action with which the progressive Church, and apparently she herself, feel comfortable. She notes the broad sense of disillusionment with the paper reforms of the Christian Democratic parties of the sixties. Instead, the ecclesiastical documents condone mediating organizations such as unions and federations, as well as the Basic Christian Communities. The radical Christians issue a call to nonviolence, to include strikes, sit-ins and marches. The clergy is to participate as companion facilitator, educator, "allowing the people to develop their own solutions." The obvious limitation of these prescriptions is that they fly in the face of a reality where such tactics and organizations are either completely illegal or subject to direct military control or paramilitary terror. They also do not satisfy the worry of priests and nuns working in poor communities who know that by giving a public shape and national significance to the needs of the poor without also preparing them for self defense and sustained political activism, they may simply expose their parishioners to lethal danger.

In short, Lernoux has a blind spot to some of the hardest realities of Christian resistance and revolution. The fixation in her book is with martyrdom, succumbing in pacifism to violent persecution. The back of the book is a full roster

of all the clergy who have been killed, country by country, and the text itself is constructed from case after case of innocent Catholic deaths. She frequently invokes the Passion of Christ to suggest the requirement of suffering for liberation, but not the "rebellious Jesus," the active enemy of exploitation, described by Pellecer.

She too casually dismisses the need for revolutionary violence in any context. "A revolution," she writes,

would of course sweep away the political cobwebs, along with much else, but it is questionable whether it is desirable in the social context of Latin America. In any case, contrary to the doomsday predicted by political seers who see revolution around every corner, the probability of such upheaval is remote. . . . Even had the Church been willing to condone violent tactics, the fact is they do not work in the present Latin American context.

This is an awkward affirmation in a book completed, according to the acknowledgements, in mid-1979, only a matter of weeks from the day when Sandinista guerrillas rode a national insurrection to power in Nicaragua, ushering in a government in which two Catholic priests hold ministerial portfolios. The problem is not whether Lernoux is wrong or right, but that she fails to do justice to the lonely decisions being made by the local clergy who must accompany the poor through the revolutionary storm. She makes no mention of what appears to be an increasingly widespread phenomenon in Latin America: a clandestine Catholic resistance. Like Father Pellecer, Catholic clergy in local communities, particularly in Central America, are obliged to be consistent with their past pastoral work and to settle on some relationship with clandestine and even armed political organizations—guerrilla armies, non-armed broad fronts, self-defense groups—whose rank-and-file are poor people who acquired a vocation for change in the Bible classes of that same clergy. Local churches are asked to provide refuge, transport, communications, supplies, medical assistance. When they become targets of paramilitary threats, priests and nuns must decide whether to stay with their communities, which may involve martyrdom or hiding, or leave, which may seem like abandonment. An American priest, David Varasseur who returned in January to his home in Louisiana after nearly eight years of mission in Guatemala, heard that a rightist death squad was hunting him, and wondered "what good would I have been to the Indians dead?"

One would also like to see some mention in a book of this length of another area of ambiguity in the new Christian vision of liberation: the status of women in general, and the women religious. The nuns who are living in permanent risk in Central America in order to meet their pastoral commitments normally cannot vote in the diocesan councils which decide what work they will undertake.

In the Central American Revolutions the new Latin American Church faces tempering by a hot fire. In El Salvador and Guatemala, plain Catholic phrases of justice and equality are more likely to be in the minds of peasants and laborers who persist in rebuilding the popular organizations against the ravages of repression, than any revolutionary class-analysis or yearning for concrete reforms. The teachings of liberation and participation, more than many prelates anticipated at the watershed Medellín conference in 1968, are being implemented by their barefoot students. With its legacy of four centuries of dictating to the poor, now the Church must decide day to day how far it will go to accompany the faithful in a move closer to power. The presence of the clergy in these countries is critical to the quality of the political outcome of class war, for the Church is often the only voice that can speak of humanism amidst the unspeakable bloodletting of the battle for survival. As they have developed so far, these revolutions have offered—in fact require—a multitude of different support roles short of participation in actual armies. Already local clergies, faced with moral and theological crises, have tested these roles and devised ad hoc solutions. The Jesuit Order defended Father Pellecer's participation in the EGP, pointing out that he was not in a branch of the organization that handled arms. In Nicaragua in 1980 the Bishops pressured Miguel D'Escoto, a Maryknoll Father who is Minister of Foreign Relations, and Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture, and two other Sandinista priests, to leave their posts and return to the priesthood. The priests opted to negotiate an exceptional dispensation: they agreed not to exercise their priestly ministry while they remained in the Sandinista government. "We are again faced with an old and constant temptation—that of not knowing where to place ourselves as Ministers of God within the historical processes and necessities," noted the Bishops in their statement of agreement to this pact.

As they attempt to find ways in the herd of "historical necessities" to reconcile their commitment to the poor and to Christian tenets of restraint from violence and secular politics, the Latin American religious and American missionaries may seem increasingly strange and frightening to observers in the United States. By reading *Cry of the People*, Americans will understand the long trajectory of the humane commitment which motivates them.